



The more closely we examine our world, the clearer it becomes that the ends of things are in their beginnings, waving like Burma Shave signs from the edge of our karma. Life teaches, if nothing else, that no wheels grind finer than those we set in motion by our actions. To learn that the unfolding of our personal creation is the unravelling of cause and effect does not make the mysteries less mysterious, only more intimate and charming.

An elaborate and largely ignored ritual surrounds the birth of the new year. The capstone of the holy days is the winter solstice, a geophysical cusp marking the return of the Light. It is no accident of the calendar that the season is given over to sharing food, considering the roots of whyness, and renewing what remains of our resolve. The dead of winter confronts us with our belief systems. The holyness comes from overlaying them onto reality and finding, once again, our place in the dreamworks of creation. This in mind, a place should be made in tradition for the epiphany of John von Neumann.

Von Neumann was a mathematician, the inventor of the computer as we know it, a pioneer in cybernetics, and coinventor of game theory and quantum logic. His book, *The Mathematical Foundations of Quantum Mechanics*, is called 'the quantum Bible'. In 1932, von Neumann set out to discover why there is anything. It may be easy to take the universe for granted, but it is not written anywhere in accepted theory that there must be so much as a single quark, let alone a closed and unbounded universe of four dimensional space/time expanding in all directions at nearly the velocity of light.

From quantum electrodynamics, the most successful idea in the history of science, von Neumann knew that, behind the boggling diversity of appearances, the universe is homogenous---composed entirely of quantum stuff, each bit of which is like every other. For reasons not known and in ways not clear, this unmanifest raw material of reality articulates itself into all that is. Not a miracle, but close.

He also knew, again from quantum theory, that reality is a tenuous affair---a thin membrane of object/events dancing on a sea of potential. What registers as reality on our instruments and senses are waves of probabilities. For any point in space/time, there is an array of events that might take place. In order for there to be anything, all possible somethings but one must disappear, collapsed to zero by some statistical *deus ex machina*. The probability left is what's there when we look.

To find this collapse of probabilities, the creation of something from nothing, von Neumann built a minimal event system called von Neumann's chain---a source, a signal, and a receiver. There is no simpler system since, if any of these links are removed, there is no exchange of energy and so no reality to observe. He figured the site of the collapse should stick out like a sore thumb. It didn't. Try as he might, he could find no likely, or even possible, site for the spontaneous generation of the universe from pregnant nothing.

Because each link in the chain is made of 'quantum stuff' and each bit is like every other, there is no point at which difference, in the form of objects and events, can arise. In what has come to be known as von Neumann's Proof, he showed that, whatever it is that collapses potential into quarks, black holes, and Paris in the spring must lie outside of quantum reality. Von Neumann could think of nothing outside of the empirical world but consciousness. With von Neumann's chain, we meet the ghost in the machine and find it is us.

We are, all of us, links in the quantum chain. Beneath our differences, we are 'quantum stuff'. It is our choices and our actions that collapse the potential of our lives. In a world without illusion, there is no thee and me, and the appropriate action is always love.

Happy new year.

(The above is a reprint of Mr. Burgess' January 93 column, we thought we would give you another chance to try to understand it.)

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Ah, yes, vacation in sunny Mexico. Swaying palms, balmy breezes wafting over golden beaches in the land of Mañana. Dusky maidens sing to the sounds of a small guitar. Five and a half hours of flying to get there. EEEK!

I am not a white knuckle flyer. I'm more of a white everything flyer. We're talking palor, white as a ghost flyer. "I think I'm going to be sick," I say.

Herself, the light of my life, isn't sympathetic. "Why are you being such a baby about this?"

"I'm not being a baby, too young to die, perhaps, but not a baby."

"We're not even at the airport yet."

"But we're headed that direction."

"We paid almost \$500 apiece for these tickets. We're going to Matzatlan."

"If I give you your money back..."

"No! We're going."

Later, seated in an immense device made up of thin aluminum sheet metal and thousands of parts each supplied by the lowest bidder: "Why aren't we sitting by an emergency exit? I asked the lady who assigned our seats to put us by an emergency exit."

"Keep your voice down. I told her not to, that you'd probably jump out and run screaming down the runway the minute the airplane moved."

"We're going to die like rats in here!"

"Alex, Shut Up."

"Whimper."

My major problem with flying is they won't let me drive. Mind you, I don't know how to drive an airplane but that's what co-pilots are for. He could drive the airplane while I watched for mountains and other hazards.

"Look out for that mountain up there," I'd say.

"That's a cloud."

"How do you know?"

"The highest mountain in the world is 29,000 feet tall, we're flying at 35,000 feet."

"When's the last time they measured it? It might have grown, volcanos grow."

"Good thinking, we'll go around it."

"Thank you."

See, that would be my job, to bring up hazards they might never have thought of, like growing mountains.

Alex LaFollette

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